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ABSTRACT

This study is a retrospective examination of elements that influenced one elementary school staff to initiate and implement a school-wide innovation in their reading program in 1990-91. This school served 315 preschool children through grade three in a small town set in the rural countryside. Case study methodology was used to discover how the change was initiated; why the particular program elements were chosen; the role the staff, the principal, and the parents played in initiating the innovation; and what lessons this school's experience may have for school reform. As the school community planned for the initiation of their new reading program, the "whole language" approach to reading was gaining momentum. The notion of "early intervention" was popularly used to describe a variety of methods educators were using to deal with evidence of reading failure in young children. Their stories describe the challenges this school staff felt as they attempted a year-long initiative to merge phonics and whole language into a holistic approach to reading for grades one through three. Findings were reported around seven central themes emerging from the data collection, including: (1) empowerment; (2) academic improvement; (3) shared vision/beliefs; (4) collaboration; (5) focus on children's need; (6) site-based decision making; and (7) participatory leadership. Contains 53 references and a table of data; interview questions are attached. (Author/RS)

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ED 430 221

AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SPEAKS OUT: THEIR DECISION TO INITIATE AN INNOVATION

by

John P. Vartenisian

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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in

Educational Administration

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by

John Paul Vartenisian

Committee Co-Chairmen: Diane N. Gillespie and Jimmie C. Fortune

(ABSTRACT)

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long initiative to merge phonics and whole language into a holistic approach to reading for grades one through three. Findings were reported around seven central themes emerging from the data collection, including: 1) empowerment, 2) academic improvement, 3) shared vision/beliefs, 4) collaboration, 5) focus on children's needs, 6) site-based decision making, 7) participatory leadership.

DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to my father, George Vartenisian, who modeled in his own life and instilled in me a need to be scholarly. This milestone in my life not only fulfills my ambition, but lets him achieve his own doctoral aspirations through me. Thanks, Dad, for your inspiration and support.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

If you want to understand something, try to change it.

Walter Fenno Dearborn (Glaser, 1978)

Public school in our nation has been scrutinized, analyzed, and criticized by parents, community leaders, special interest groups, the media, and the general public for doing an unsatisfactory job of educating students. Articles appear daily in newspapers and magazines across this country, replete with comments, reflections, and opinions about our educational system. This public concern has caused some school reformers to construct platforms for educational reemergence and to initiate numerous organizational changes. Change is an inevitable occurrence, and schools are no exception to this experience. According to Glaser (1978), change is not always acceptable and untroubled, though it can be helpful. Changing a program is often a precarious undertaking and the individuals who initiate the change have no guarantees of its success or failure. Duke (1987) describes instructional improvement as "the continuous process of upgrading the quality of teaching, curriculum content, assessment, and instructional support" (p. 295). This case study concentrates on the maxim that the school staff must transform its beliefs to become the change agent for school improvement. This study is an examination of one school's decision to initiate a new reading program.

Historical Background

According to Holtzman (1978), in the nineteen fifties schools were similar in the way they presented the curriculum. Individuals not directly connected to education were studying how change affected educational outcomes, and were identifying and developing educational change factors within private institutions. Organizations such as The Carnegie Foundation, The Twentieth Century Foundation, The Kettering Foundation, and various other agencies provided information about total system school changes to educators during this period (Ginsberg & Wimpelberg, 1987). Some of this research was translated into practice and the elements revealed to practioners the tools for change in their own schools and classrooms.

Holtzman (1978) also credits the sixties and seventies as the time periods that introduced expansion of federal involvement in American research and development. This author's example was The Learning Research and Development Center in Pittsburgh that was opened and funded to study instructional design, evaluation, learning patterns, technology, and other educational processes. Educational researchers there began to look at change as a process and this research supported the role of localities in making changes in education.

In a review, McLaughlin (1990) revisited The Rand Change Agent Study which had, many years earlier, implied that local input and adaptation were positive factors for effective projects. Revisiting these findings using the changed practices and perceptions still reinforced some of Rand's findings, and this review concluded that projects which had active district leadership and locally supported strategies exceeded those with only "outside" change agents. It was also determined that policy cannot always mandate change, but local capacity and local promotion encourages achievement of educational outcomes (p.13).

Busick and Inos (1994) commented that many studies have described educational changes as those that have been planned, regulated, and interpreted with a top-down approach. The administrator or supervisor had been the catalyst, solely responsible for the initiation and implementation of the changes. Their research project provided conclusive analysis that there was many variables, practices, and factors which could lead to school improvement and the probability of success. This premise was further documented by Fullan's (1991) descriptions that change are multidimensional, and occurs at many levels, such as the classroom, school, or the system.

Fullan (1991) became aware that reformers were taking concentrated looks at the paradoxes, forces, or variables in schools and school change. He identified the characteristics of these changes and called them "change factors." He also contended that most research does not provide regulations or guidelines on how to implement these changes. The innovations which do succeed can be realized when initiators adapt to the innovation and the innovation is adapted to the factors. The staff of the school examined in this study began an initiation of a new reading program for their students. This study will provide insights and perceptions from this venture.

Statement of the Problem

The review of the historical background of this school's endeavor will provide insights into the process of initiation. The research ultimately could present an impetus for other school changes. Washington Irving once said, "There is certain relief in change . . . I have found in traveling in a stagecoach, that it is often a comfort to shift one's position and be bruised in a new place" (Cronin, 1978, p. 19). Though not bruising, this research effort does consist of one school's decision to initiate an innovation. This shift in philosophy created many perceptions and intuitions worthy of study.

Purpose of the Study

This study documents the events as one school staff changes a reading program. A view from one school staff's perspective is provided regarding the perceptions and intuitions they encountered in the initiation of this innovation.

Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- What effect did the planning for this innovation have on the participants as they were engaged in the initiation phase?
- What were the benefits or obstacles the staff encountered as they began a new reading program?
- How did the staff go about initiating a change?
- Did the role of the staff, principal, and parents affect the innovation initiation?
- Why did the staff choose the program elements for this particular program?
- What lessons does this school have for school reform?

Significance of the Study

This study can provide insights into the perceptions and factors that influenced one school staff to make changes in a program. The initiation phase of the change process can be illuminated by those directly involved in it. As educators seek improvement in their schools, this study may serve as a model for other initiation efforts. This research design will support the responses and perceptions which occur during the process of initiation with a descriptive history, and this evolutionary process could be useful to other schools and individuals faced with similar decisions. It is hoped that this study will broaden the informational base for initiation of innovations and possibly function as the impetus for further studies.

Limitations

This study will focus on one particular setting in one elementary school in an attempt to provide insights about the process of change initiation through an innovation. The study will be limited to interpreting the perceptions and feelings of the faculty, staff, parents, external personnel, and the observations of one researcher in that school. The data gathered from participants in this study occurred some five years after the initiation phase but does not limit their influences. Also, the data was seen from the eye's of

the past administrator of the school. This study may contain similarities to some other school situations, but it should be recognized that this school is a singular location.

Organization of the Study

This study was arranged and developed into five chapters. Chapter 1 included the introduction, study background, statement of the problem, purpose, research questions, significance of the study, and limitations of the study. A review of the literature relating to school change initiation appears in Chapter 2. The methods of the research are outlined in Chapter 3, and include research procedure, collection of data, and data analysis. The results of the study are described in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 summarizes the research findings, related conclusions, implications, and recommendations.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Blended Background

The most important task of any elementary school is to teach children to read. The school's reading program should enable each student to read fluently and enjoy reading as a tool for knowledge gathering or leisure fulfillment. Many schools fail with this goal, and therefore large numbers of students do not become proficient readers early enough. A controversy has long divided many educators centering on whether it is best to use a phonics approach or implement a whole language program for teaching reading. This pendulum has swung back and forth over the last thirty years. The debate is still controversial, but practioners are slowly converging upon the premise that both methods linked together offer students the maximum benefit.

The year that the school in this study approached the initiation of a new reading program, the whole language proponents were stronger and on the upswing. Many schools were using corrective measures to remediate their students' reading difficulties, rather than preventive techniques. These methods were costly and time consuming. Some programs directed toward prevention of the humiliation and frustration suffered by elementary school

children were appearing around the country. The term *early intervention,* was a catch-all for the variety of ways educators were using to eradicate reading failure. Most practioners and researchers thought that these interventions should have standards of vigor and because of the possible high costs should be studied to provide policy makers and the public with guarantees of their quality and effectiveness (Pikulski, 1994).

The challenge for this school staff was to research and select a method that would combine phonics and whole language into one discrete program. The selection of one specific reading approach was only one part of the blended approach this staff undertook. They also began the initiation phase of the change process to introduce this innovation in the school during a one year period. The spirit of collaboration and mutual respect provided the atmosphere for such an undertaking. This was a monumental task to incorporate a new reading approach to an entire school and also begin the initiation phase of changing anything. It represented a blended historical background of new ideas in reading instruction and new ideas in the change process.

The most effective teachers were already using the best practices of a balanced approach. These experienced professionals taught skills by having

the students read appropriate materials, but also taught phonic skills in isolation. They were able to "integrate complicated instructional strategies to tailor effective approaches for the diverse needs of their students"(Honig, 1996, p. 9). The seasoned teachers used many proven, successful techniques to instruct reading and provide a mastery level basis to their own classrooms. This passion for an innovation is reflected in a statement by one early childhood educator when it was said that, "innovative teaching occurs in an atmosphere in which differences among teachers are valued, and cooperation is encouraged" (Havens, 1994, p.143).

Reading Research Models

Almost thirty years ago information was presented to show that children taught with programs that contained some phonics emphasis outperformed those with none. These reading instructional programs and the effects of these programs having no phonics instruction versus some supplementary were studied. The conclusions still seem to be true. As important, especially to more modern reading instruction, was the finding that intensive phonics instruction produced slightly better word recognition and paragraph reading (Pflaum, 1980).

One early study in the seventies, concluded that there were two

specific viewpoints present in the reading process. One was that the perceptual process involved a hierarchy of differential skills, and the other indicated that the processes were developed epigenetically from sensorimotor coordination skills (Silverston & Deichmann, 1975).

Another research effort measured achievement gains by first graders from a variety of innovations and compared them to the traditional basal program. The researchers found that programs that stressed the sound-symbol relationship showed better results than the basal alone. According to Pflaum (1980) structural linguistics and phonics-based programs produced greater achievement gains that the basal programs. Pflaum (1980) determined that new innovations using a multitude of methods, on the average, produced greater results for children than traditional methods such as basal programs. The study also pinpointed that the particular model was not as important as the focused techniques of the teachers of reading. A channeled or centered approach usually was found in innovative programs than in the ordinary reading instructional model.

Manning (1995) thought there were five areas of concern with elementary school reading programs. These issues were the priority of reading within the total curriculum, the effectiveness of beginning new

programs, the quality of the remedial or supplementary program, the effectiveness of staff development, and the quality of independent student reading in the school. Pikulski (1994) concluded that reading program success depended upon many factors and included: development of the total program, extra time for some students, special instruction for at risk children, simple texts, progressive reading fluency, phonics instruction, writing, ongoing assessment, and accomplished teachers.

The effective schools model and cooperative learning had also surfaced in 1987. Mastery learning and outcome education were prevalent, as well as teacher expectations and student achievement. Programs concerning learning styles, learning modalities, and brain hemisphere differences had sparked interest. All these strategies or programs provided opportunities for students to be more successful and educators were eager to improve educational outcomes (Guskey, 1990).

At this time in history many new ideas and innovations had attracted the attention of educators. One early intervention model, called The Reading Recovery Program, came to this country from New Zealand. This reform was based on the research of Marie M. Clay, who described behaviors that signaled internal processes of young readers and provided teachers with ways

to observe these behaviors. Clay (1991) defines reading as "a message-getting, problem-solving activity which increases in power and flexibility the more it is practiced" (p.6).

According to Allington (1992), Reading Recovery was designed to accelerate the cultivation of students who were having difficulty learning to read. Lowest-achieving first grade students were placed in an intensive thirty minute tutorial program. These children stayed with this daily regime until they had developed the self-monitoring reading levels of their classmates. The majority of these children showed after 12-14 weeks of training sufficient progress to continue with the average children in their classroom without further assistance.

Pinnell (1991) says the program targets first graders and describes the program as one that could benefit a small percentage of young readers who are having difficulty with the critical tasks of reading. The structured one on one daily lessons provides an intensified method to making up for lost time. The accelerated approach helps children "make use of knowledge in flexible ways, develop efficient processing systems, and thus make faster progress" (p.13).

Another research model surfaced in the late 1980's. This was a

comprehensive program called Success for All and was designed to ensure that all students could successfully develop competence in reading and writing in the early primary grades. It originated at John Hopkins University and came after a challenge from a public school superintendent to a researcher named, Robert Slavin. Slavin and his team had been working on a book demonstrating effective programs for at risk children, but were asked to assist with the local elementary school program. Their experimental program involved an intensified ninety minute period of a teacher engaged with a small group of students in a literature discussion, basic language skills' instruction, story structure, and the integration of reading and writing (Slavin, Madden, Karweit, Dolan, & Wasik, 1992).

Allington (1992) describes the major elements in the program as including an emphasis on cooperative learning, core curriculum organization, at-home reading, and tutorial opportunities for individual children. This program concentrates its efforts on the K-3 levels of the elementary school design and has a primary goal of having all children reading on grade level by the end of the third grade.

Success for All uses tutors to provide additional one on one instruction. The program provides assessment strategies and preschool through third

grade curriculums. It has a family support team tenet and uses a school-based program facilitator to monitor the program on a daily basis. Teachers and tutors are extensively trained, and training continues throughout the first year. The program also has an advisory committee consisting of the building principal, facilitator, teachers' representatives, and student family members (Slavin et al., 1992).

Another program that surfaced in the eighties was called Early Intervention in Reading and began in several schools in Minnesota. The program had the regular classroom teacher working with small groups for an additional twenty minutes each day. The teacher focused on repeated reading and summaries of books, and blending word recognition and phonemic segmentation. Some students also worked with tutors or volunteers for additional time each day (Pikulski, 1994).

Lipson and Wixson (1986) suggested that reading is a dynamic process that is achieved when the reader interacts with text, mission, duty, and setting. The current thinking, however, indicates that this controversy about skills-based instruction versus whole-language philosophies should not be an either/or question, but reading education should offer a balanced approach, one that offers literature rich activities with the skills to decode and recognize

words.

Improvement programs vary from school to school and district to district. All the advocates are eager to attest that their strategy or innovation improves educational outcomes, although their research usually differs greatly. Most improvement programs have common goals and premises, and have similar components of the teaching-learning process. These include clear learning goals, instruction, learning through formative assessment, feedback or enrichment, and summative evaluation of student learning (Guskey, 1990). This research effort is a twofold exploration incorporating reading innovation history, but also illuminating the elements of the innovation change process. The previous reading models served as indicators for beginning a new reading program in this study's research school. The school staff incorporated many innovative ideas and also used information from site visits to other programs.

Change Process Research

After many years of attempted educational change and reform, educators are still searching for more concrete knowledge about the initiation process. Change according to one author is "a process whereby one's thinking and doing are altered" (Fox, 1992, p. 71). Factors concerning change initiation are critical for practitioners and form a persuasive argument

for awareness and understanding concerning the perceptions surrounding these transformations.

Fullan and Miles (1992) in a collaborative article for success or failure of reforms believe that "serious education reform will never be achieved until there is a significant increase in the number of people-leaders and participants alike has come to internalize and habitually act on basic knowledge of how successful change takes place" (p. 745). Change is not synonymous with success and often associated with failure. Everyone involved with innovation change has a personal stake or internal map about how the change proceeds and progresses. Mackenzie (1983) in his review of many research studies suggested that schools involved in change through innovation should identify their own educational concerns and then act accordingly on assumptions that better methods can be found. Mclaughlin (1990) examined the Rand Study of the seventies and found truisms which still prevailed today. Initiation of an innovation continues to be a local phenomenon in which significant choices far outweigh policy features as design, funding, system requirements, and technology. Local involvement exceeds the reach of policy and has the ability to change over time. What matters cannot be mandated by policies and these policies can impede the ability of practitioners to plan, initiate, and

implement innovative efforts. The success of the change often depends upon the local support and the belief system within the structure. Strategies as staff training, classroom assistance, visitation or observation of similar projects, regular practical meetings, teacher participation in decision making, local development of materials, and administrators' commitment to the project are effective measures for successful initiation.

Speck (1996) suggested that the process of change includes adaptation, acceptance, and institutionalization of change by the teachers, school staff, school organization, and school community. The school would be challenged to make a real difference in the quality of learning with the students. Evans (1993), points out that human beings are ambivalent concerning change. They praise it in principle, but oppose it in habit. He states that change raises hope, but also stirs fear because it challenges power and proficiency, creates controversy and bafflement, and risks the loss of coherence and meaning. "Because resistance is inevitable, the primary task of managing change is not technical but motivational: to build commitment to innovation among those who must implement it" (Evans, 1993, p. 19).

As early as 1974, a review of educational interventions concluded there was no approach for effectively improving instruction that was competent

enough to regulate national policy. Since that time studies looked more at the processes in educational interventions, as opposed to the labels attached to them. Research in instruction began to turn away from the sequence of steps for good teaching and toward the processes of the evolutional interaction with learners (Mackensie, 1983). In the early eighties effective schools were identifying and acknowledging their own problems, and assuming that better solutions could be found through communication with staff, students, and parents. After many years of attempted educational change and reform, educators are still reaching for more concrete knowledge about the initiation process.

During this time period, many school districts were presented a paradox of repeated collapse of local education reforms, despite dissatisfaction with the education system. Low student achievement scores, high dropout rates, and even a lack of safety for children were cited as indicators of failed education policy. Politicians, educators, community leaders, and parents all sought alternative strategies to improve the quality of educational opportunities (Hula, Jelier, and Schauer, 1997). Corbett and D'Amico (1986) acknowledged that men and women permeate the past of educational innovations and these people move up, move out, or simply burn

out. School improvement programs indicatively are convincing that the innovation should not depend on heroic efforts but should support change through a systematic process. These researchers support using four requirements to promote educational improvement. The first phase is to provide available time for the staff, enabling the faculty to explore, confer, observe, participate, dampen against obstacles, provide occasions for encouragement, and recognition for success. The second requirement is cushioning against interference, which suggests that it takes time for the commitment toward the changes to occur. The improvement plan needs a support system to survive the frustrations, the exhaustion, and the confusions of dealing with school change. Thirdly, it gives the opportunities for encouragement and rewards the participants for their efforts. Celebrate with recognition and backslapping. This supportive behavior provides the staff with stimulation of their core values and emphasizes the importance of their labors in the change mechanism. The fourth suggestion is recognizing the necessity to consolidate the innovation into the school operation which protects the change if implementors depart or new staff members come on board.

Evans (1993) suggested that there are five biases for fostering

innovation: clarity and focus, involvement, communication, acceptance, and challenge. Schon (1987) believed that practitioners need to look at the problem setting rather than problem solving. He terms "problem setting" as:

> The process by which we define the decision to be made, the needs to be achieved, the means which may be chosen. In real-world practice, problems do not present themselves to the practitioner as givens. They must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations which are puzzling, troubling, and uncertain. When we set the problem, we select what we will treat as the things of the situation, we set the boundaries of our attention to it, and we impose upon it a coherence which allows us to say what is wrong and in what directions the situation needs to be changed. Problem setting is a process in which, interactively, we name the things to which we attend and frame the context in which we will attend to them. (p. 251)

Today, demands are for open understanding and sharing of ideas, knowledge, and debate. Schools must incorporate innovations that are advantageous for the students, not just go through the motions in a precise manner. Clickman (1991), as a participant in an effort known as The League of Professional Schools, expressed his opinion that educators "must confront

our knowledge and use it to guide our efforts; then we must operate our schools in different ways, using our knowledge" (p. 8). The evidence suggested that effective schools were those with solid leadership, where trust existed as commonplace among all parties, and teachers shared in choices and had responsibilities for school decisions.

In 1990, the Rand Study was revisited and conclusions recorded that policy cannot always mandate change, but local capacity and local promotion encourages achievement of educational outcomes. "People change when they see the gap between the way things are, and the way they should be" (Zakariya, 1995, p.11).

Change is usually difficult for practioners and offers many avenues to personal discovery. Change agents have detected two distinctive types of change efforts. Cuban (1988) categorizes two distinctive types of changes and terms them as first-order and second-order changes.

First-order changes improve the efficiency of existing conditions such as allocating supplies, scheduling people or activities, adding or deleting curriculum content, and implementing new evaluative tools.

Second-order changes attempt to modify the way organizations are collectively established. These changes alter the usual methods of solving

tenacious problems. Examples of second-order changes are open classrooms, voucher systems, and schools that are operated by the community's curriculum and budgetary conclusions (Cuban, 1988).

Sarason (1996) describes changes as Type A or Type B. Type A changes alter what people say, do, feel, think, and all combinations of these. He feels that "it is more a fleeting thought and feeling of change and that the direction and implications of change are very murky" (1996, p. 345).

Type B changes are not systemic changes, but intended to change and improve something, not the school or the school system. Examples of Type B changes are increased standards, monitoring of homework, enlisting of computers, team teaching, and assessments of teacher competencies (Sarason, 1996).

This school responded to an innovation, which though having some structural changes, primarily reacted to a first-order change or a Type A change. The process the staff underwent stressed change within themselves before making changes within the reading program. Fox (1992) states that change is a process that altered one's thinking or what one is doing. To change something, one must examine other procedures and weigh the importance of these results. A school faculty should inspect many methods

and approaches before deciding upon the selected innovation.

McLaughlin (1990) gives four implications of successful reform. One, the change needs to be systemic and continuously enduring. The second implication points to content for being as important as the process. The third implication deals with the framework of reference and the ability to engage the natural networks which can support the change. The fourth implication, concerns the framework within any research policy and it describes the factors that enable practice are not changeable or cannot fix policies. Recognizing these elements can benefit the initiation process. "A focus on enabling practice within the presence of existing constraints highlights the conditional, mutually reinforcing, and contextual nature of factors that support effective teaching" (p. 15).

Adopting a new innovation must deal directly with the staff's belief system. Believers will use their utmost effort to see that a new innovation thrives, but to be successful, everyone should be on board. Changing anything becomes easier if each person is in a supportive mode. "If a context for productive learning does not exist for the teacher, then teachers cannot create and sustain a context of productive learning for students" (Sarason,

1996, p. 386). Changes require teamwork and group effort for prolonged gains. Baldridge and Deal (1983) mentioned several trends for promoting change and related them as the simple pressure to make a change, incentives to make mandatory changes, and making changes because of growth such as new programs or personnel. These processes are assuming that educational change is fundamental and natural, and organizations and programs are changing all the time, and that most changes are unplanned at least from the people inside the structure. Fullan (1982) simplified the change process by analyzing four phases: adoption or initiation, implementation, continuation, and outcomes. Factors identified with adoption were described in an understandable language detailing the processes of initiation. Busick and Inos (1994), in their research effort from Hawaii cataloged change framework into three basic stages and their research effort concentrates on the first stage. Stage one is called the initiation phase or mobilization process and links educational change to high priority needs. The process also should consider following a clear model or in some instances another previously proven innovation. The initiation phase must include strong advocates who will provide leadership and commitment for the educational improvement. Lastly, is the active involvement of all those who contributed ideas and vision to the

innovation. This framework will provide a basis for initiating any educational change.

During the process of initiation, people involved in the change process often just change their procedures or habits before they change their belief system or basis of understanding. Even as initiation begins there is not a guarantee that the change will flourish. Innovation concerns power, and the politics of the distribution of power. Is the change innovation agreeable to all the school staff? Can the staff adjust adequately to the change or has the capacity been distributed equitably? Research indicates that an internal element such as a teacher or staff member usually collaborates with an external element such as administrators or community members. It is assumed that improvement is a collective process and that the collaboration, experimentation, study, and evaluation are circumstances which lead to successful school improvement. This trust and sharing of ideas and expertise can make better teachers evolve and produce successful innovations (Fullan, 1991).

Sarason (1996) claims that three factors of organizational design affect initiation of a project. They are the relationship qualities among the staff, the support of the principal, and the usefulness of the administrators of the

project. The active promotion by all three parties to the short term and long term effects of an innovation are greatly responsible for the success of the project.

As one deals with an innovation, it means changing behavioral concepts in the context of skills, activities, and practices. Change is a process of realizing, learning, and understanding new concepts and procedures. This key issue occurs as change unravels "vis-a-vis what people do (behaviors) and think (beliefs) in relation to a particular innovation" (Fullan, 1992, p. 22).

One exemplary school staff involved in the initiation of a school innovation implied that traditional beliefs should be replaced with a philosophy which is child-centered. Their staff "shared testimonials about changes in students and became risk takers, and accepted the group support for changes" (Smith, Toothman, & Bakken, 1995, p. 334).

Fullan and Miles (1992) indicate that individuals involved in educational change "normally confront the loss of the old and commit themselves to the new, unlearn old beliefs and behaviors and learn new ones, and move from anxiousness and uncertainty to stabilization and coherence" (p. 748).

McLaughlin (1990) points out that initiation of an innovation requires

the effort to "receive important energy from the motivation of advocates-individuals who believe in the effort and are willing to commit energy and effort to its success" (p.13). Educators who are required and persuaded to change routines or implement new practices can become believers. "Educational change depends on what teachers do and think; it's simple and as complex as that" (Fullan, 1982, p. 107).

Since one of the most important factors in any change process is the person affected by the change, attention should be placed upon the individuals directly involved in the changes. Their concerns or personal opinions can cause success or failure for any innovation. According to some research, users or implementers of an innovation have concerns based upon seven stages. These stages include the self dimensions of awareness, informational, and personal concerns that are likely to be personal and inner concerns. The other concerns are management of the task, consequences of the innovation on students, collaboration among staff members, and refocusing after implementation. As the new innovation is initiated, teachers will want to know how the program started, needs for preparation, endorsement of the innovation, and how it is going to work. These concerns are likely to be very profound during this time (Hall, Hord, Huling-Austin, &

Rutherford, 1987).

Sarason (1996) contends that "years of teaching, sense of efficacy, and verbal ability" significantly influences the success of the innovation (p. 77). The school is a tiny culture in itself and it exists as a loosely knit organization. This environment suggests that nothing works all the time, but anything that makes sense could work one time or the other. The success of an innovation means different things to different participants, and the ways these actors surmise progress within the changes often is extremely pivotal in the process of implementation (Mackensie, 1983). Charisma of the inspired teachers involved in the implementation usually dominates the school environment and contributes to those staff members who are less satisfied or experienced (Joyce, Murphy, Showers & Murphy, 1989).

Hord (1987) states that "through their direct involvement with the innovation and their facilitation of teacher interaction and other key subprocess, head teachers wield decisive influence in determining whether or not implementation takes place" (p.16). "If the teacher as advocate can become skilled at integrating the change and the change process, he or she can become one of the most powerful forces of change" (Fullan, 1982, p. 125). The burden of innovation must inevitably fall on the teacher. The

teacher must initiate the innovation and learn the new skills that are required. Depending on how different the innovation is, the burden can be costly indeed, and benefits seldom approach costs. The teacher is expected to give personal effort and deplete professional skills without recompense, which represents a poor investment. Some do; some do not. In any case, the innovation can be realized only through the changing work skills of the teaching staff, or it cannot be realized at all (House, 1974).

In the present study, the reading approach changed drastically for this staff and in their attempt to initiate the new program, many perceptions, decisions, and reactions were illuminated within this context. They became believers and with this came change. This successful change must either "accommodate the core of behaving and believing, or engage in the difficult enterprise of reinterpreting, redefining, and reshaping it" (Rossman, Corbett, Firestone, 1988, p.19).

Blended Approach

This past decade has observed progress in understanding the processes in school improvement and educational change. Most of the studies have handled educational changes as those that have been planned, regulated, and interpreted with a top-down approach. The administrator or supervisor had

been the catalyst, solely responsible for the initiation and implementation of the changes. One research project's conclusive analysis indicated that there were many variables, practices, and factors which could lead to school improvement and the probability of success (Busick & Inos, 1994). Fullan (1991) described change as multidimensional, and indicated that change could occur at many levels, such as the classroom, school, or the system.

In this research effort the school staff identified the problem as an ineffective reading basal series and curriculum. The staff wanted very simply to have most of the children exiting each grade reading on grade level. They identified the problem and through formal and informal discussions decided to start from scratch using researeh to adopt and initiate a new program.

They wanted a language rich approach, an organized text, and a comprehension program established in classrooms for engagement in these activities. The issues were organization of classrooms for activities as reading to children, writing through the language experience, implementing listening skills, encouraging leisure reading, and providing high interest and high quality books or magazines. They also desired a comprehensive approach to reading skills development. This organization of phonic skills needed to be incorporated within the language rich program (Honig, 1996).

Controversy and perplexing attitudes have reflected around the best way to teach children how to read. Should skills be taught directly in an organized phonics approach or should the children obtain these skills through immersion in the contextual depths of reading? The faculty of this school chose to incorporate a blended approach to reading instruction. Using an encased whole language model, they selected segments of phonics instruction to ensure a total reading strategy for all the children.

Chall (1983) concluded that reading programs that used decoding and phonics, speech mapping, practicing with context in reading were more effective than solely meaning-based methods. She also was an advocate for whole language in schools. This philosophy permeates the reasoning behind this study's school staff to make changes in the reading program and merge both lines of thinking. Their task was to initiate a new innovation within the context of integrating two positions concerning the specifics of reading instruction. This change process was the beginning of a very committed venture.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Research Environment

This study will use the case study research design of one school. Stephens (1995) states that a case study "examines a specific phenomenon and illustrates the complexities of a cultural event" (p. 5). The school is a cultural location. The innovation is a cultural activity, and the participants are members of the culture. This case study, through the interaction of these participants, will present elements of perception and particularity, and will focus on the collection of data from teachers, staff members, parents, and administrators in the school studied. It will also provide perceptual data from historical accounts of the organizational changes during the year 1990 through 1991. Huberman, in the text of Fullan's book, Successful School Improvement, recorded:

> We are in the realm of perceptions, even in the most technological or materials-based projects, and these perceptions will determine the actions, or inactions, that follow. We would be foolish to ignore them or to weigh them less seriously than more instrumental aspects of changing an instructional program or resolving a core institutional

problem. (Fullan, 1992, p. 8)

Stake (1995) stated that triangulation provided proof or authentication to case study. It also increased credibility and furnished commonality. This research data was collected from documents generated during the pilot period process. These archival data are historical in nature, including minutes and written recordings of faculty meetings, school board agendas, and newspaper articles produced during this time frame. Recordings and transcripts of participant interviews, a confidant, and a central office administrator were taken years after program initiation became another part of the triangulation. The third segment for data collection was the recorded and transcribed interviews from focus groups also collected after the initiation stage. Detailed questions were asked of all the interviewees and covered many factors of change initiation. This triangulation research effort used these three data gathering methods.

Data Collection

The strategies for data gathering in this study were qualitative in nature and concentrated on the complexity of this single case. Structured interviews were personally conducted with participants at times and locations chosen by each interviewee. Framing questions for conducting interviews

were developed from the research questions set forth in this study. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded. All documents generated by the school staff, local newspaper, and the school board were collected and this primary source became part of the data collection. The historical evidence was reviewed and a series of preselected questions was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for similar or dissimilar themes.

Personal interviews addressed the perceptions of one Title I teacher and data collected from her responses. A confidant of the principal, a person who was close to this entire process of initiation, was interviewed and the interview transcribed and analyzed. Two first grade teachers were interviewed and their perceptions became part of the data collection. A second grade teacher was also interviewed and her reactions retrieved. All factors concerning this innovation during the initiation phase were extracted from interviews with every participant.

Other insights were elicited from a focus group interview of school parents whose children experienced this innovation firsthand. Interviews were conducted and transcribed from a focus group of kindergarten teachers with the intention of gathering data from a group indirectly involved with the innovation. Another personal interview was conducted with one central office

staff member.

Internal and External Validity

Did the reading program make a difference? Were controls placed on the design of this innovation to show a change in the reading process of the students? These questions may be answered in chapter four as the perceptions of various internal and external participants are illuminated. This study is providing perceptions of initiation not proof of any independent variable having an impact. The research design controls or eliminates many of the variables that could lead to alternative understandings. The study is limited to one year and in one school. There were no scores, testing, or statistical measurements to conflict with accurate data gathering. All members of the staff were included and therefore subject grouping proved not to be a problem. The validity was enhanced because more than one "instrument" was used to measure the same innovation. This descriptive, interpretive data by the participants give meaning to this qualitative study.

External validity refers to the general aspects of the findings of the research design. Even though the design only studies a single elementary school, the discoveries could be helpful to other educational groups or schools. Inferences could be made from the perceptions of these participants

to other practioners using reading programs or teaching reading to elementary age children. This small sample adds relevance to the study because of its linkage to other theoretical networks concerned with the change process and initiation of innovations.

Data Analysis

Schein (1985) states that group dynamics indicates that various interpersonal and emotional processes within each member can develop into a shared view of the problem or a shared solution for the problem. To examine group dynamics, parallel questions were asked of each interviewee and in a similar order to ensure analogous conditions (Nisbet & Entwistle, 1970). The interviews were structured, standardized, and formal. This systematic approach permitted the "formulation of scientific generalization" and provide a controlled atmosphere (Van Dalen, 1962, p. 259). In addition to tape recordings, notes were taken and became part of the research data. After the completion of each interview or focus group session, the recording was scripted, and reviewed for thematic significance. The information was analyzed and sorted to identify any patterns, themes, or commonalities. The data was translated from within the general themes that were identified. A debriefer of professional status was also incorporated to read and clarify any

patterns overlooked, as well as give advice on content. Emerging themes were classified and studied to determine similarities and differences in content. Informal observations and documents were used as additional data and reported in this study. Any actions, interventions, or interpretations were also included in the data analysis. The accumulation of these data sources was used to corroborate the findings, and became the central body of chapter four.

Reporting

The reporting of this qualitative inquiry is in narrative and descriptive form, using the natural language of the participants. The accounts are drawn from the interviews conducted and transcribed using personal interviews and historical sources. Textual quotations will be incorporated into the research effort so an actual script can be documented for the reader.

The researcher was an observer, interviewer, and participant in the initiation phase of an innovation change. The role changed from time to time with this researcher assuming more of a role of an observer who was reporting the group's feelings, perceptions, fulfillments, and problems. Having been removed from the actual surrounding the researcher could be objective and emotionally detached. The data obtained from this effort

consists mainly of verbal descriptions of interactions and behavior, and categorizes the documentation into emerged themes.

Chapter 4

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Introduction

The elementary school chosen for this study began the initiation of a major curriculum innovation several years ago. The faculty and staff studied the proposed innovation for one year prior to implementation and researched various successful programs and delivery systems for reading instruction. The time frame of this effort and subsequent initiation began during the 1990-1991 school year. The year long endeavor led to the implementation of a new reading program for grades one through three. The program continues at present and this case study will provide the unique opportunity to research and analyze why the staff made this decision, and what factors and perceptions influenced the initiation of this innovation.

The 1990-91 school year called for improvements in key areas. The need's assessment from the previous year suggested these needs: playground equipment needed to be replaced and new pieces installed, staff development had been minimal and areas of interest were identified, technology updates and implementation were critical, and most specifically, the current reading program was ineffective for the students. The daily tasks as recording tardies

and absences were mundane and simple accounting tasks now accounted for daily energy consumption. Had the tedious, simplistic task replaced the realization of lofty goals? Did giving of oneself and striving to do the best in all instructional areas prevent change from occurring?

The observations and perceptions presented in this research effort will give insight into these questions and more. At the school, teaching and learning was paramount to success. The students had many opportunities and a caring attitude existed among the staff. The major identified need surfaced, and it was a simple premise. The majority of the teachers felt that the basal reading series was not effective, and many of the third graders were leaving the school unable to read on grade level.

The School

The school chosen for the study is one of four elementary schools located in a small hamlet in Virginia. It serves students from preschool through the elementary grades. The enrollment during the 1990-1991 school was approximately 315 students. The school was opened in 1970 as an elementary school with grades one through six. It had served the surrounding neighborhoods and at this time primarily was a school for predominately white children from working class families.

Now, twenty-one years later the school serves very few white students, an insignificant number of neighborhood children, and has approximately 70% minority students on its school roster. All the students are bused to the school and many from the farthest part of the town. This school serves the only major housing complex for low income families, and all these children are bused there daily. The school building accommodates two classes of preschool through the Head Start program, and also serves self-contained special education programs for the learning disabled, preschool disabled, educable mentally disabled, developmentally delayed, and emotionally disturbed. The school delivers instruction in all the curriculum areas with an emphasis placed on reading and math.

The school has undergone changes in the staff and had an experienced faculty in the 1990-91 school year. The kindergarten teaching core averaged sixteen years of teaching experience. At grade one the two teachers had more than ten years experience, while the other two staff members had five and two-years respectively. The second grade staff averaged 22 years, with one teacher having spent her whole career in the school, and in the same grade level. The third grade level had a mix of seasoned and inexperienced teachers with one teacher having 25 years experience, another with 16 years, and the

third with only two years' teaching experience. The support staff consisted of three Title I reading teachers, one enrichment teacher, and three special education teachers. Their experiential backgrounds ranged from eight to fifteen years experience.

Over half of the staff had masters' degrees and five were reading specialists. This staff was judged to be hardworking and committed to making all the students successful. They were viewed as acclimating to the status quo and having an antiquated philosophy of delivering reading skills. They were accustomed to doing things their way. The school had gone through some staff changes in 1981 when one local school was closed and many teachers were transferred. During the 1990-91 school year only four staff members had been there before 1981, while the rest were transferred during the 1981 school year, or had arrived at the school after that date.

This seasoned school staff began the initiation of the new reading program during the 1990-1991 school year. This year was also a year of piloting ideas and concepts, researching, visiting school sites, and collaboration from all the staff.

The consensus of the faculty was to initiate the program in grade one and move ahead into the other upper grades if the initial year was termed a

success, and if funds were provided to hire more staff. A program format was constructed after many sessions and it involved the combining of whole language methods and phonics instruction. It consisted of four major phases; small teacher-directed reading groups, whole group reading sessions, a language arts segment, and a computer lab section. Within the format of these four forty-minutes teaching blocks, the small group instructional period addressed four unique teaching portions. One was a directed discussion of self-selected reading books that each student had taken home previously and practiced. The second segment directed itself to big book instruction and instructed students using a combination of whole language and phonics approaches to literature and reading. The third section was a phonics approach called make-a-word (Cunningham, 1998). The fourth and final segment dealt with creative writing and gave the students a daily ration of imaginative writing and artistic representation.

In the 1992-93 school year the reading program progressed to the second grade as a result of funding allotments and teacher allocation. The next year, after deeming the program a success, it was incorporated into grades one through three. During these past few years this innovation has flourished in the school and become the main reading program for all the

students within the regular and special education areas.

Themes

Data in this study were collected through minutes, agendas, news clippings, interviews, focus group interviews, and general observations. These collection methods were used to answer the research questions in this study. The findings are tendered through major themes that emerged from the analysis of data.

Several themes materialized as participants described their perceptions and reactions regarding the effects of the initiation process. These themes are related to the research questions and are displayed in Table I. The themes were:

1. Empowerment - refers to the staff members feeling that they are given a voice in decisions affecting the initiation, and the power to make these resolutions
2. Academic/achievement improvement - refers to curriculum alignment and structure, and improvement of achievement standards
3. Shared vision/beliefs - refers to focusing on changes and altering personal belief systems therefore creating a vision for the whole organization

4. Collaboration - refers to camaraderie and team building toward moving ahead with strategies and goals
5. Focusing on children's needs - refers to placing what's important for children in the area of reading instruction first and foremost
6. Site-based decision making - refers to the staff at this school making most of the critical and important decisions concerning the initiation phase
7. Participatory leadership - refers to all the stakeholders becoming leaders and initiators of ideas and resources

Table I
Relations of Emerged Themes
and Research Questions

Research Questions	Themes
1. What effect did the planning for this innovation have on the participants as they were engaged in the initiation phase?	■ Empowerment ■ Individual autonomy ■ Shared vision/beliefs ■ Collaboration ■ Confidence ■ Team building
2. What were the benefits or obstacles the staff encountered as they began a new reading program?	■ Academic improvement ■ Focusing on children's needs ■ Site-based shared decision making ■ Altered belief system ■ Empowerment ■ Resources
3. How did the staff go about initiating a change?	■ Collaborative style ■ Participatory leadership ■ Introductory facts ■ Hands-on training
4. Did the role of the staff, principal, and parents affect the innovation initiation?	■ Interaction with others ■ Participant ■ Mentor ■ Leadership ■ Visionary
5. Why did the staff choose the program elements for this particular program?	■ Focusing on children's needs ■ Improvement of student achievement ■ Academic advantages
6. What lessons did this school have for school reform?	■ Student academic improvement ■ Collaboration ■ Empowerment for staff ■ Site-based decision making

Research Question 1

"What effect did the planning for this innovation have on the participants as they were engaged in the initiation phase?" The interview data maintained that some of the participants had been introduced to the concept of a similar innovation previously during visits to a model school. The innovation was new to everyone else. A great deal of written data from research models was distributed for comment and discussion. Evidence was presented by various staff members that pointed out successful reading programs or factors needed for success.

Prior to initiation of the innovation the feelings were mixed and some uncertainty existed. The staff was encouraged to share ideas and experiment with concepts. Grade levels were inspired by curiosity and interest to plan together and envision together. To exemplify this point one second grade teacher remarked, "Several different teachers went, and we decided that we really wanted to try this although we did not know whether we could get the administration at that time to agree to it" (Grade Two Teacher Voice, personal communication, November 10, 1997). The realization of empowerment caused many staff members who had not worked together

closely in the past to begin to plan as a school team. Individual autonomy did not suffer because most faculty members advocated the need for ideas from anyone, and at anytime. The non-formal approach made it comfortable for pros and cons to be presented equally without fear or reprisal. A first grade teacher demonstrated this perception when she stated, "The teachers all seemed enthusiastic about it, had positive things to say, and we knew we needed to do something. This was an opportunity to incorporate something different"(Grade One Teacher Voice, personal communication, December 12, 1997). This feeling of acceptance and trust had brought the participants close together in one channeled effort. They viewed the new innovative approach as the catalyst for change that was overdue and needed. "The possibility of small group instruction sort of attracted people to it, and from that they started looking for a model that we could use as a springboard to an entire program," said a kindergarten staff member (Kindergarten Teacher Voice II, personal communication, May 11, 1998).

Confidence within the staff blossomed and a free flowing occurrence of ideas and values came forth more comfortably. One second grade teacher commented:

Well, I've had different principals over the years, and their

> philosophies as to following the textbook, doing every page in the workbook has caused turmoil. I had not always agreed, but I did as I was told--and then until I got a principal who allowed me to do the things that I wanted to do to meet the needs of my children . . . this made me feel in control (Grade Two Teacher Voice, personal communication, November 10, 1997).

For many participants, the school atmosphere was more positive and their individual talents could be incorporated into their teaching techniques. The confidence they had in the program gave them some control and individual autonomy over the skills they taught. One staff member echoed, "I think you find that people who have a lot of confidence in themselves will go for change. People who lack a little bit of confidence to do on their own sometimes want it done for them"(Grade Two Teacher Voice, personal communication, November 11, 1997). The staff was all brought together to incorporate a process of change using their own ideas and abilities. This mechanism caused a group of teachers, who normally did their teaching behind closed doors and as isolated individuals, to become a unit combined in an effort as a whole staff. One teacher said that, "It falls on the school as a whole, not the individual. We all bought into this together. We were

grouped together" (Grade Two Teacher Voice, personal communciation, November 11, 1997). The same teacher also made this comment, "We would sink or swim together, and I think that was the way all of us felt. Everybody worked with it to do their part so that all of us pulled together" (Grade Two Teacher Voice, personal communication, November 11, 1997).

The initiation phase of this change provided a platform for the staff to be empowered. Everyone pulled toward common ground and this process created a positive, enlightening approach for many teachers and staff. One second grade staffer said, "I began to experiment with some of my own ideas because I felt free to do that. So I began to spread my wings a little bit"(Grade Two Teacher Voice, personal communication, November 11, 1997). Not only could they focus on a specific innovation, but the effort narrowed the aim. Empowering teachers gave them the opportunity to participate actively and use their own ideas when decisions were made.

Individual autonomy was identified as an effect on planning as it provided each participant with the opportunities to intellectualize their reading and thinking. They could share the strategies they had discovered and discuss the information with everyone. One Title I Teacher was quoted as saying, "In our groups of children, a large number were non-readers. We

came up with ideas and some techniques that we researched and used them with these children to improve their reading skills and to help them become readers" (Title I Teacher Voice, personal communication, December 6, 1997). Prior to this initiation project, staff members were reluctant to share research openly, and often left this to the few more experienced or uninhibited conversationalists. Participants reported that the focus on the initiation began to change their beliefs about how to teach reading and the factors necessary to be successful with children learning to read for the first time. One teacher reflected that, "We had the freedom to do some of the things that I felt would meet the needs of the children"(Grade Two Teacher Voice, personal communication, November 10, 1997). As the staff interacted with other members and discussed the opportunities, they also activated a vision that was universal to all those involved with the project.

Based on data collected and coding available, a major effect on the initiation phase was collaboration of the participants. The team spirit and partnering were viewed in every faculty meeting and many informal discussions among peers. The grade levels solidified their passion for this new program and the school as a team finally started to develop. One second grade staff member stated:

> It's safe to say that if you get the faculty in the right state, then you can go with something like this program. But you're only as strong as your weakest link. So we all had faith in ourselves and our fellow peers to work together as a team. I had to believe that all teachers were going to take my children into this program and do as good a job as I did (Grade Two Teacher Voice, personal communication, November 10, 1997).

The belief in self and others had started a binding effect that was slowly pulling in the entire faculty. Time would be the ultimate test.

Confidence was identified as another effect in the data collection. Team members were given the opportunity to make recommendations, corrections, and additions at anytime during the initial stage. One Title I Teacher said, "I honestly thought that small group instruction was definitely what we needed. I didn't care if you called it "number one," or "success raw," or "apples and oranges." It's just the thought of getting the low number in the classroom and working with them on an individual basis, and seeing success, and then making it happen"(Title I Teacher Voice, personal communication, December 6, 1997).

It was perceived by the interviewees that the process empowered them,

reinforced individual autonomy, assisted with a shared vision, changed their belief systems, fostered collaboration and team building, and provided the confidence they needed to become more comfortable with the initiation undertaking.

Research Question 2

"What were the benefits or obstacles the staff encountered as they began a new reading program?" There were many advantages to initiating a new school reading program as identified by the participants. Some inconveniences were mentioned in the interviews and will be discussed later in this chapter.

Focusing on academic improvement was given most frequently as a benefit to initiating this innovation. The staff indicated that a need for improvement in reading scores had surfaced and this new program contained elements designed for success by students. "Well, number one, their test scores were a true reflection of our children not being able to read at grade level. So we incorporated this reading program which we thought would help," stated a third grade teacher (Title One Teacher Voice, personal communication, December 6, 1997). Prior to the pilot period the scores at the third grade level had declined and many teachers seemed to place the

poor showing on an inconsistent basal series and lack of "tried and true" strategies for successful reading. A staff member asserted that, "my evaluation is watching these children every day. It's not sitting down with a test to tell me. If a child is enjoying reading, is reading well, is comprehending very well, then a test score may not show that"(Grade Two Teacher Voice, personal communication, November 10, 1997). Improvement academically did not necessarily mean test score increases, but sometimes suggested a change in the student's behavior, comprehension, or classroom performance. The staff noted these changes and evaluated them for being as important, if not more important, than inflated test scores in reading. The demands of successful teaching had to enlist the holistic benefits for students as early readers. A Title I Teacher accessed the situation when she stated, "It made me feel as though I was meeting these children's needs for once. I was able to sit down and say, so and so can't read on this level, so I'm going to drop back a book, and we're going to start on another grade level, then we're going to gradually move on"(Title I Teacher Voice, personal communication, December 6, 1997).

This interview data and emerged themes revealed that the staff wanted much more than score improvements. They wanted a child who could read

on grade level, comprehend, discuss, and also use reading as a leisure activity. The staff wanted to focus on the essentials of the children they served.

The perception was that the effect of shared decision making on the school site was a benefit in the initiation process for teachers and other staffers. The staff interaction and provisions for sharing information contributed to a feeling among the participants that they were in charge of their destiny. A second grade advocate expressed it this way when she said, "We all bought into it, nobody was coming in telling us we had to do this program. We were going to sink or swim together, and we knew it that way. It wasn't going to be the principal's fault if it failed. It wasn't going to be one individual teacher's fault if it didn't work. It was just there"(Grade Two Teacher Voice, personal communication, November 10, 1997). This feeling permeated many faculty members' thoughts and actions. The program direction and course bearing would involve everyone, and all important decisions concerning the project would be made by the participants on the school locale.

Many participants felt that their belief system had been altered by the information provided by faculty members and research presented during staff

meetings. These changes were perceived as beneficial by most and viewed as necessary to continue the initiation phase of this change process. The changes in the staff fueled the initiation process and helped speed up the innovation change. It was stated well by one administrator as she described:

> We had to do a lot of educating that this was what it took to have children learn to read. We needed small group instruction and understood those groups of four to one or five to one was desirable. At first it seemed ridiculous with everybody saying the same thing . . . teachers . . . support personnel . . . the principal . . . and it wasn't a ploy on our part for everyone to say the same thing. It's just that we all happened to believe the same thing (Administrative Voice, personal communication, November 13, 1997).

Their individual transformations were enlightening and inspiring to other staffers. A shared vision was an advantage of the new program initiation. The process from individual thinking to group operation was a pleasant awakening. A teacher put it perfectly when she stated, "Uh, maybe I think what you need to do is go through that initial process that we went through when we bought into the program. Make its changes and then your own. If you are or others are not happy, then make a change so everyone can

be happy too" (Grade Two Teacher Voice, personal communication, November 10, 1997). The willingness to change one's own beliefs and alter them to fit the needs of the group seemed to be of utmost importance to many of the staff.

Even some of the parents were involved in this visionary journey and felt comfortable knowing that changes were occurring for the good of their youngsters. One parent interviewee pointed out how she felt when she stated that, "It got me more involved because I was excited about it. I couldn't wait for them to bring the next book home. And the progress that they made . . . I think after, as I can remember, once they successfully completed a certain section of a book or something and they moved on, my child made progress" (Parent Voice I, personal communication, May 6, 1998). The family members worked together and used school resources to practice nightly with reading materials and written selections. They could see progress daily as their children moved through literature and shared their daily lessons in reading instruction. The parent and family connection nurtured the link between the school and the home. Everyone was a part of this new innovation and it was causing changes to occur in the relationship between the community and the school.

One varied opinion did exist with the initiation phase of this innovation change. A central office administrator had narrowed the focus of this school program into a single mechanism, and that was the improvement of test scores only. The administrator supported the initiation of this innovation with zeal because of its implications for improvement in standardized reading scores and placed a high priority on the increase in test scores. She was not directly involved in the initiation process and lacked some factual information about the program and its direction. Her comments showed this rather one-sided thinking:

> I think I had some unrealistic expectations. I really expected that we could give a teacher forty-five minutes a day with a four to one instructional group size, and that was the magic word, that we were going to see better, and we would see great improvements in our test scores for the program. I felt we were going to really, really, really pick up those scores, pull the schools out of school program improvement, and you know, make then competitive with the higher socioeconomic schools (Administrative Voice, personal communication, November 13, 1997).

Research Question 3

"How did the staff go about initiating a change?" The interviews and documentation showed that participants perceived that there were many indisputable approaches used and advantages uncovered as strategies for initiation. Again a collaborative style of decision-making emerged as the interview data was gathered. There was evidence that the goals of the program initiation were selected by all the members directly involved in the innovation. Individual teachers could make choices as group, but also could use their own creativity and ingenuity. One second grade teacher found out the following:

> The students went out to reading instruction and I did more creative writing. That changed my outlook on that. I did away with more things that I felt was not necessary for my children to succeed. That was the judgement I had to make. The author's viewpoint was very important for every story, but when this kids struggled to read, I had to use something more worthwhile than use the manual's version (Grade Two Teacher Voice, personal communication, November 10, 1997).

Initially, there was an unwritten or unverbalized choice to use this type

of team building mechanism. Now each staff member could be an individual within a circle of teamwork and collaboration.

One major theme emerged from the interviews and historical documents as this research question was asked. Participatory leadership was cited most frequently as a strength of the initiation of this new innovation. In the past many decisions were made by grade level chairmen, committees, or individuals versus going through a process. One central office administrator put it so eloquently when she said, "We managed to take the Title I program and change it along the lines as the handmaiden of the school initiative. We also managed to take textbook monies and redirect them. We managed to get additional monies and instructional resources so that if we needed something we could get it"(Administrative Voice, personal communication, November 13, 1997). All the ideas and resources were initiated by various school leaders from the administration through the teaching ranks. Everyone participated as members of our improvement team. Team members became very aware of the new reading program and of the change process.

Fact finding expeditions were organized and some firsthand knowledge was supplied as staff members were encouraged to explore other programs or research recent successful methods. One teacher commented on her reactions

to gaining insights about new programs:

> I think the ones that made the initial visits to the other school were more enthusiastic, and I think their enthusiasm was kind of catching with the rest of the faculty. Since the initiation phase was started in grade one I think the first grade teachers were the ones who had the strongest commitment, but they had a lot of support from other grade levels (Grade One Teacher Voice, personal communciation, December 12, 1997).

Gaining insight from a variety of sources strengthened the initiation phase of the change process. Each faculty member was given the responsibility to gather information and then share this with others. Some members shared articles and written research while others used their influence to invoke thought and understanding. One Title I Teacher after an initial visit to one model site responded with this commentary. "There were several trips, I know. I went on two of them, but we made more than that. We wanted information so we could initiate this change and have a commitment as a faculty to this new program"(Title I Teacher Voice, personal communication, December 6, 1997).

Many of the staff were motivated and became leaders and initiators of

ideas and resources. The praise they spread brought skeptics into the mainstream of this process, and created a collaborative spirit. Participating in the project stimulated more professional growth and caused the staff members to do more reading and thinking about the data that was collected and what they heard verbally from other teachers. A less experienced teacher said, "I saw and heard how teachers--Mrs. _____ was a big promoter back then, and she was dealing with the program directly. She was complimentary of it, and we were getting good publicity off of that. The kids were loving it"(Title I Teacher Voice, personal communication, December 6, 1997).

This insightful venture was a foundation for building togetherness and team spirit. The team approach gave participants an opportunity to openly discuss research information and provide each other with pertinent data concerning reading program models. One first grade teacher remarked:

> I think the confidence came from somebody listening to us and valuing our opinion, and having enough confidence in us to say, "Okay, you know what's best for these kids; go for it!" You know that's going to build trust in anybody, and I think that was why we were afraid of failure, because people had not said that in the past to us. Say what you need to do and then do it (Grade One Teacher Voice, personal

communication, December 12, 1997).

Research Question 4

"Did the role of the staff, principal, and parents affect the innovation initiation?" Interview transcripts disclosed that participants, whether internal or external, agreed their opinions, actions, and ideas had a positive affect upon the initiation process.

This participatory manner was reflected in most of the responses from the data retrieval. There was a general consensus that the staff's ideas were beneficial and most of all, heard by others.

"I think you have to be creative and motivated to come up with good ideas. The plan kicked off a good spark of energy, and I think a lot of people did that, and uh . . . I think the teachers had to be encouraging for this program to work," replied a support teacher agreeing with idea sharing and team participation (Title I Teacher Voice, personal communciation, December 6, 1997).

The school leadership was also mentioned in a positive light and was assumed by the principal, teachers, and central office administration. All participants were leaders in their own right and offered wisdom and clarifications concerning the initiation phase of this innovation. A confidant

close to the administrator during this period commented appropriately as she said, "The principal could see that the teachers needed some direction and cohesiveness in their approach to reading. The program involved the whole school and everyone focused on reading at the same point each day. He saw this program could be one that would excite the teachers, and that emphasis on reading was very necessary"(Confidant Voice, personal communication, February 17, 1998).

The teachers saw their role changing too as the administrator empowered them to explore and experiment. A first grade teacher explained the change when she remarked, "For the first time since I had been teaching, I heard someone in authority say, 'You don't have to. Why? If it's not working, maybe you can do this.' And it gave us a road to go down that we had not had a chance to go down before"(Grade One Teacher Voice, personal communication, December 12, 1998).

The division assistant superintendent reflected her own participatory set when she stated, "I think the staff was aware of their commitment and the division's commitment to reading and to student achievement, and they really wanted . . . they were right for leadership . . . right for a new program as reading was the heart and soul of the school"(Administrative Voice, personal

communication, November 13, 1997). Everyone was committed to succeeding and this common bond kept all the interested parties channeled toward the same end.

> The principal was viewed as a guide, initiator, team member, consultant, and external participant. He was sometimes viewed as someone with some of the answers or someone who could get the resources needed. One teacher felt that the principal was a facilitator of information and stated, "It was more I think, than the principal's attitude that allowed me to do it, it was I putting my own ideas into the program"(Grade Two Teacher Voice, personal communication, November 10, 1997).

People looked for guidance and direction from the administrator, but still wanted their own part in the leadership demands of this initiation.

Parents responded with their own perceptions concerning the benefits of beginning a new reading program for their children. One parent responded, "Well, I felt the school did it because they had a number of children who were not successfully reading on grade level or what have you. I feel that's the reason why they initiated the program at the time. I didn't know that there were that many problems there. I guess they needed to just move

on"(Parent Voice II, personal communciation, May 6, 1998). Efforts had been made to enlist parent input but no formal method was used. According to the active participants the parents were not always fully aware of the problems or pitfalls of the programs within the school curriculum. Their view was a limited one, but their input was vital for program's success. Most of the information the family at home received came from their nightly interactions with their children. Educationally contented students translated to satisfied parents.

Research Question 5

"Why did the staff choose the program elements for this particular programs?" Prior to the initiation of this innovation the school's staff was discontented and discouraged because many of the children leaving the third grade for another school were not reading on grade level. "Our children were not achieving, they were not doing well, and basically the basal program as a reading program was just not working. We had frustrated children and we had frustrated teachers," one first grade teacher commented (Grade One Teacher Voice, personal communciation, December 12, 1998). A confidant also echoed this sentiment when she remarked, "Just looking at the performance of the students, they needed something to really inspire the

teachers to do a better job and motivate the children to learn. They began looking for a program that would fit the needs and decided on their own"(Confidant Voice, personal communication, February 17, 1998).

The faculty's efforts and hard work, before the study, seemed to mean little when they knew that the end result had not been as successful as they thought it should have been. This general understanding had caused them to seek other avenues for success in reading instruction and many were doing their own thing in the classroom. A kindergarten teacher remarked, "We knew that something needed to change, that some other approach needed to be taken"(Kindergarten Teacher Voice I, personal communciation, May 11, 1998). This uncomfortable feeling of lacking something permeated the building and created an environment for change.

The interview data indicated that the active participants needed a guide and desired encouragement to focus on the needs of the children in general, and especially those students who were at risk of becoming poor readers.

Numerous reasons for the change in the program were given by interviewees and participants. One second grade teacher commented:

> Uh, I was encouraged to share my ideas, and this let me know that I felt like something was needed for my children. I was to do it. It

> opened a door that had been shut, and so I began to experiment . . . not really experiment . . . to use some ideas that I wanted to use in the classroom that when you are locked into a textbook you don't have a chance to do. They were my things and the strategies that I wanted to accomplish (Grade Two Teacher Voice, personal communication, November 10, 1997).

Some of the needs pointed to specific things like the daily schedule and the time desired for instructional purposes. A Title I Teacher reflected this as she commented, "This reading program worked with every child at every level and helped each progress at his or her own pace. It's individualized, so you can work with one child on one thing while you're working with another child on something else"(Title I Teacher Voice, personal communciation, December 6, 1997). The pressures of day to day teaching caused many staff members to reassess their time lines and time frames.

Another grade level staff member commented on the curriculum and said:

> I saw small group instruction and creative writing. Up until the time we initiated the new program, creative writing just was not taught. If you followed the textbook and did all the workbook pages, did

> everything in the teacher's manual, you had no time to write creatively . . . it takes time. The schedule and basal locks you in, and the component in this program was one of the big selling points for me (Grade Two Teacher Voice, personal communication, November 10, 1997).

One response from the interviews particularly was interesting since it came from a central office administrator involved with instruction, and presented a view of the initiation process from a distance. This candid reaction pinpointed to some degree of accuracy the feeling of the staff as they were in the middle of initiation of the new reading program:

> The whole school, the total consensus of the teachers was that they didn't feel like they were seeing the growth from the students per year overall: they wanted to be more competitive within the division and the state. They were tired of looking like losers when test scores and achievement ratings came out, and they wanted some resources. They were right for something and their level of concern was very high. They were very good professionals who felt like they were vacuuming without any power . . . you know, that they were just going through the motions, and they had lost all the power. They

> wanted something different, and yes they felt something else was needed for all the children that went beyond a textbook adoption or classroom library approach. They felt they needed something new (Administrative Voice, personal communication, November 13, 1997).

This insight captured the essence of the reactions of various faculty members as uncovered by the data gathered from the interviews.

The data gathered from the parent focus group interviews provided some additional insights into the viewpoints they had concerning why a new program was selected for reading with their children. One mother stated, "I think you can tell when a program is sort of burnt out or so to speak, when the teacher . . . you can tell what the teacher's thinking, their attitudes about children and how they're progressing in the classroom. You know then, it's time to change and do something else"(Parent Voice I, personal communication, May 6, 1998). The parents mentioned the positive intervention strategies and even offered their personal assistance.

One educated parent echoed this when she said, "advantages . . . I tell you, I wish I had known more about the program then. I was getting my master's in reading and could have brought even more information to the teachers"(Parent Voice II, personal communication, May 6, 1998).

The data indicated that the parents had their own thoughts and refections concerning the reasons why the school initiated a new innovation. They thought the teachers cared and were doing a good job, but were focusing on students with problems in reading. One parent of a first grader remarked, "I thought they cared a lot about helping students who were having problems reading and trying to talk with those students, and doing the best they could to alleviate that. I felt the school was really striving to find a program that would work to help students who were having problems"(Parent Voice II, personal communciation, May 6, 1998).

The family members enjoyed their children coming home daily with trade books in hand and welcomed the opportunity to assist with the program's goals. Naturally they wanted the best possible educational benefits for their children and deemed this new innovation as an opportunity for further success by their children by their elicited responses in the focus group. One mother when interviewed replied:

> Wonderful! Bringing the books home every night and reading the books to me was great. At one time I wasn't sure if they were memorizing the words or truly reading. I randomly chose words from a page and they could tell me what they were. I knew they were

> reading. But, bringing a book home . . . it was wonderful. They cried if they left the book at school and forgot to bring it (Parent Voice.I, personal communication, May 6, 1998).

Most parents wanted the chance to get involved and to provide input concerning the affairs that affected them.

Other reasons given during the interviewing process focused on the academic advantages for a new reading program, and highlighted the importance of student achievement and student improvement. One first grade teacher said, "Students absolutely adored the new program. They couldn't wait till the class started because they got so much individualized instruction. They had small groups, read from self-selected books, and got to talk to the teacher during discussion time. They treasured their little books and couldn't wait to begin instruction. I don't think there was a child who didn't like this group time"(Grade One Teacher Voice, personal communication, December 12, 1997).

The opinions were extensive and enlisted thought and background knowledge. Focusing on the needs of the children and motivated with the desire for students' academic improvement provided the perfect foundation for a new innovation. One second grade teacher remarked, "I got further than

I wanted to go with a lot of my kids. I did away with a great deal too. Sometimes I skipped workbook pages and parts of the basal text. I had a difficult time letting go of the past, but got to the point where I said "Don't do it all" and continued to teach"(Grade Two Teacher Voice, personal communication, November 10, 1997). The students' needs were central to everyone's thinking and paramount to the direction and commitment to the innovation. The childrens' needs were placed as the most important aspect of beginning a new reading innovation.

Research Question 6

"What lessons did this school have for school reform?" One major emphasis gained from the data reflected on student academic improvement. This theme emerged from the interviews, meetings, and news clippings as a central basis for the initiation of the new innovation. One article pointed to this feeling when it stated, "It was a positive approach by the staff and everyone seemed very committed. The city council was enthusiastic that some school was trying something innovative and new in the way of assisting student achievement and student learning in the area of reading"(Minutes, Agendas, & Articles, personal communciation, June 13, 1998). The community had embraced the need to use a model for improvement and had

placed their stamp of approval on it.

Positive comments came from one school board member after she visited the school site. She was extremely enthusiastic about the possibilities this new innovation presented for the children at the school.

Another factor was the ability to make choices reflected and was evident in this teacher's comment, "There was more flexibility, more choices, more materials to choose from, just more of everything "(Title I Teacher Voice, personal communciation, December 6, 1997). A first grade teacher was very candid when she said, "Our children were excited, we were excited, because it was new, and we could tell immediately that the program was working. We had children going home from day one convinced they were readers because of the book they took home"(Grade One Teacher Voice, personal communication, December 12, 1997).

A Title I staff member stated, "Well, it increased their test scores, and it helped with their confidence in reading. It improved self-esteem and helped with behavior. You get five kids in there and you can work with them, and then behavior improves too"(Title I Teacher Voice, personal communication, December 6, 1997). The opportunities that were presented with the program far outweighed any negatives. Advantages abounded for instruction and

instructional personnel. A first grade teacher pointed to the indisputable elements as she commented, "I would have to say one advantage was the opportunity to read aloud every day with someone really listening to them. It was their chance to shine and read a book with three or four other children, and having the teacher right there listening to them read"(Grade One Teacher Voice, personal communication, December 12, 1997).

The collaboration of the staff and the internal participants was a huge insightful lesson for school reformers everywhere. The team approach was at the very core of this initiation project. A kindergarten teacher presented this viewpoint when she made this comment, "You know once you decide to do a program and have some time between that decision and implementation, then make sure that everybody gets what they need together. Make sure they feel comfortable and secure with what they have and then it's off to the races"(Kindergarten Teacher Voice II, personal communication, May 11, 1998). This team approach was also reflected in one staffer's comment, "To be given true input, I think helped because the other teachers felt they would be heard. That was something new, because a lot of times when input had been sought, the decision had already been made"(Kindergarten Teacher Voice I, personal communication, May 11, 1998).

All internal participants and external personnel directed their comments and perceptions toward the importance of achievement and collaboration. A kindergarten teacher put it very meticulously when she stated:

> A benefit of our program was having general knowledge or background information and having an understanding of what the program was trying to accomplish. It was very important for the whole faculty to be behind something even if you were not a direct participant. If you know what's going on you don't feel left out in the dark (Kindergarten Teacher Voice II, personal communication, May 11, 1998).

School reform requires commitment, collaboration, and time. The commitment to small group instruction, and the blended program of whole language and phonics prompted the faculty to surmise the need to change something. Their previous perspectives and outlooks suggested the reading program was the place to start. The time was at hand, and the place was their own school.

Chapter 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND FURTHER RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

This chapter finalizes the research study designed to investigate the perceptions and intuitions concerning the decision that influenced one school faculty to initiate an innovation. Included in this chapter is a summary of the results, the conclusions drawn from the study, recommendations, and implications for further research.

Summary

This study was a tiny "snapshot" of one school staff's decision to initiate an innovation. Key concepts emerged providing perceptual and intuitive information from participants in this change phase. Teacher interviews, historical archival documents, parent focus group interviews, and external participant interviews provided details of their insightful journey. Six research questions were answered from the data collected from these sources and the emerged themes provide the support for this study.

Addressing the initiation phase of any innovative venture is a difficult task. Most of these endeavors end in failure so it is extremely important to plan effectively and to enlist the assistance of all the participants. Conceiving

the goals and aspirations are only a small segment of the initiation process. Educational interventions encounter barriers and obstacles and this study illuminates some of these and how the staff dealt with them to turn them into positive learning experiences.

Empowerment

The theme that emerged again and again with each research question was the empowerment that the faculty perceived during this effort. The staff had a voice in decisions and resolutions, and there was a tremendous benefit throughout the initiation phase of the change process. They were committed to a common endeavor and sensed a renewal of power and reliance. One second grade staffer replied, "Well, it was a commitment of the teachers and the principal. We decided we wanted to try something different, although we did not know whether we could get the central administration to agree to it. But it was something that we agreed to as teachers and the principal"(Grade Two Teacher Voice, personal communication, November 10, 1997) This positive aspect of empowering others seemed to be at the center of thinking with all participants involved in the new program.

Even though the principal was indirectly involved with some decisions, the bulk of the decision making was made by the teachers. The administrator

was just another "member" of the team and that translated into a bottom up approach. The empowerment of leaders distributed the responsibilities and tasks more equitably among all the staff members.

The term "we" was used over and over to describe those empowered with the authority to finalize resolutions. A first grade teacher pointed this out when she commented, "I think our commitment to the program was stronger because they were listening to us. (Central Office) Let's make this work and show them what we are talking about. The faculty was strong enough with experience at all grade levels and could pull that off"(Grade One Teacher Voice, personal communication, December 12, 1997).

The teachers felt they were well informed about the choices and fully aware of the pitfalls attached to changing a reading program. They welcomed the skepticism and responded with utmost professionalism and the tenacity to achieve their goals.

Academic Improvement

One of primary reasons for the staff to undertake this new innovation and proceed with initiation were the benefits they perceived that would occur academically for their students. The external pressures from the administration and parents combined with the internal desire for success,

motivated the faculty to press onward with an innovation that could provide success for the children.

All the interviews in one way or another suggested that the entire teaching staff were conscious of the need for academic improvement. These feelings were sensed by the administration, teachers, students, and parents. Since schools should revolve around academic progress, it was cited by much of the data to be of utmost importance.

Providing a quality program usually ensures academic achievement and this innovation project attempted to be a successful program. Specific needs of the students were addressed and a wholistic approach to reading was introduced. The interviewees indicated time and time again their desire to do well and to make their students successful. The driving mental force pursued the task at hand, and focused narrowly in on the academic needs of the children.

Shared Vision

Participants reported that having the opportunity to interact with others and share in a common bond was a motivating factor in the initiation of the new innovation. Before this effort, there were limited occasions for discussing issues or relating research findings with one another. Most work

had been done in grade levels configurations and limited involvement to very small groups. The new initiation effort brought all the staff together and created a platform for provoking exchange and building professional relationships.

Some resistance was inevitable, and one primary factor for initiating change was to motivate the participants. The staff members built a commitment to the innovation and this focus developed into a shared vision for everyone. The foresight required energetic and flexible people, and through their personal investments the innovation thrived.

A common bond formed as the project fostered thought and imaginative ideas. The teachers shared a vision of every child being able to leave this school reading on his independent grade level. The heart and passion of all the participants developed into this collective revelation. As each member became an effective change agent then the vision encircled the entire staff. Their changed values and beliefs motivated them toward their desire for sustained gains in student performance and achievement. The common sense of direction formulated the vision and motivated them forward.

Collaboration

Prior to this initiation, in this researcher's eyes, many participants had a limited view or restricted background of what really occurred in the school and a narrowed knowledge base of the team decision-making process. They had been accustomed to the administrator making all decisions and these discoveries impacting upon them. Being a part of the initiation effort gave them an opportunity to express their ideas and provide their insights, and to see the school instruction program from a different perspective.

Coping with change becomes easier when everyone collaborates and cooperates together. If the changes are to take place, then people need to stop doing things the old way and start doing them a new way. New mindsets and outlooks must develop and those involved need to know that the road to change is difficult, but possible. Planning collaboratively can make the transition more comfortable and acceptable. Even though change begins as an external process the difference really occurs within each participant. This internal process differs from person to person and is nurtured by a collective approach to planning, discussion, and initiation.

The staff at the studied school realized and recognized the need to work together toward a common cause. This comprehension was evident as

they initiated the innovation and interacted with one another.

Focusing on Children's Needs

Staff members seemed to focus on the needs of their students frequently and very realistically. They had been acclimated to the concept of realizing these needs through grade level strategies, and now were seeing the needs met through a unity of all the school's grade levels. The narrowing of the focus stimulated their thoughts and concentrated their efforts toward one explicit innovation. Focusing on this one problem increased the probability for success because many previous distractions were eliminated.

As everyone focused on one phase of the change process, the school climate itself changed, and this evolution improved staff morale. Staff members believed they could and therefore they did. Many long hours were spent narrowing the focus to identify particular needs in reading and particular needs of individual students in the reading process.

The staff was responsive to the students' needs as they perfected their skills and tried to make the school a vital, stimulating place to learn. Granted the changes took time, but because of the highly personal approach of each individual, the program flourished.

Site-based Decision-Making

To be successful in a group decision-making process requires a cohesiveness within the group, and all parties need to cooperatively work toward a common goal. Reaching a consensus was often difficult and some individual opinions and ideas conflicted with the common effort. As the task was clarified, the group effort became easier and communication flowed freely. Bean and Wilson (1981) identified many stages of decision-making and stated that "individuals see the result of their efforts, they will more seriously commit themselves to future group endeavors" (p.42). The teachers were excited about an opportunity to provide input and to have an active part about bringing change in the school.

The problem was identified as a weak reading program and the faculty has the task for devising a method or model to correct this problem. The solution was more seriously considered because of their direct involvement rather than a decision being generated by individuals not directly involved. The positive lines of communication and the single objective created a climate of mutual respect and good feelings for the project and each other.

Participatory Leadership

The role of leadership varied from day to day and thought to thought.

Many staff members assumed leadership capacities and created many avenues for dialogue and discussion. Participants took on the challenge of being leaders and performed at higher levels than their regular assignments dictated. One staffer made it clear when she stated, "We had the people who were committed to teach reading, doing it well, asking for resources and support . . . then gave it to them"(Grade Two Teacher Voice, personal communication, November 10, 1997). Each individual directly involved in this project realized their potential and in turn school leaders were developed. A cycle had begun and the process was excelled by their desires to be successful.

Professional growth occurred during the year long project as the participants were empowered to express their ideas and opinions. They became enlightened as their knowledge base increased and their awareness of good rereading strategies was uncovered. They encouraged, acknowledged, and listened. Their philosophies were realigned as they gained the trust and respect all leaders need to be truly successful.

Even the principal's role was more of a participant rather than a leader. He clarified and voiced approval and encouragement. The principal talked less and listened more with the aspiration to have as many teachers assume

leadership responsibilities as possible. Sometimes it was hard for some staff members to view the principal as a participant but as the weeks progressed his role was more clarified. Most meetings were led by teachers and staff so the spotlight was removed from the principal. This created less friction and participants felt more comfortable enlisting their opinions without feeling threatened.

The new school leaders demonstrated clarity and focus, and inspired commitment for the shared purposes. As the teachers helped shape the reform, the collaborative decision-making process deepened and the concentration was on effort and determination. Their readiness persisted as the change process continued full speed.

Further Research Implications

The most apparent limitation for this study was that it was done in one elementary school, in one school division with data collection that took place five years after initiation. Contrasts and comparisons were not examined, but perceptions were within the confines of this school setting. The research focused on the feelings, opinions, and realizations of one staff as they initiated a new innovation.

Additional studies could be done to see if the size of the school would

have a different effect upon the initiation of an innovation. A study could be done when the innovation differed or was in another curriculum area. Expanding the change process to implementation could also be an area of new study.

Quantitative data would have measured the program's success or failure. The evidence presented was done with words rather than concrete quantitative data. Some of the outcomes uncovered through the interviews might not be acceptable to some researchers and clarification could occur through hard data.

A follow-up study of this same school today would determine if the stages of the change process have been realized. It would be interesting to know if full implementation had occurred and also if institutionalization ensued.

In summary, several possibilities exist for further study in examining the factors of program initiation. More of our colleagues need information concerning making changes and using a collaborative process to achieve them. Empowering a staff to accomplish a project is a major undertaking and many teachers could benefit from this experience. Our efforts to improve instruction and achievement must be channeled to make us more productive

in working resourcefully and effectively.

Commentary

After the school staff had initiated and implemented the new reading program the school atmosphere was more positive and upbeat. The program was used to instruct children in a blended format of whole language and phonics. The staff empowerment continued to fuel their approaches and attitudes. They were very motivated to assist with the direct reading needs of the students. The staff developed a keen awareness of outcomes and this cumulated with increases in scoring in reading comprehension five years after the initiation began.

The teachers through their unique experience with changing an innovation developed a very flexible attitude toward any other change. Each member demonstrated a desire to try new things and broaden their instructional techniques. Their personal outlooks were more focused and they used research, conferences, and course work to improve their instructional strategies. The morale of the entire staff improved as they witnessed the success of the children.

Today the staff still has the team approach and have used their empowerment and decision making attributes to begin a new reading

innovation called Success for All. From the reports received the faculty has embraced this new program with vigor and tenacity. The grapevine news indicates that the staff is the most flexible and hardworking in the school system.

Epilogue

Initiating this innovation has been my most rewarding educational experience. I can easily say this because no other experience has so openly expressed how successful a school can be when all of its staff is running on the same cylinders. Over the last nine years this background has increased my effectiveness as an elementary administrator. It has broadened my perspectives and changed my outlooks. I now have the capacity to believe that difficult, sometime impossible barriers can be hurdled if the timing is right and the participants are up to the task.

The project helped me grow as an administrator. My concept of leadership changed as I saw others assuming the role and becoming successful. I could accommodate change and take on hardships without feeling alone or abandoned. My personal confidence soared and my persuasive powers increased. This whole experience let me know that anything can be accomplished with effort, teamwork, and determination.

Introducing a research-based plan was a new approach for me and an effective vehicle for enhancing my personal and professional relationships with my staff. It made all of us closer and we developed a trust that can never be denied. As I valued their views and listened to their comments, it became apparent that they in turn had more respect for me and my abilities as a leader.

Studying reading programs and models has given me the expertise I have needed to lead at my present assignment. The knowledge I have acquired has made me realize how important research is to the people in the field. Without this data, practioners are defenseless and unable to mount attacks against the everyday problems that school personnel face. This research effort has made me more balanced and less likely to jump into anything. The exchanging and engaging in professional deliberations with colleagues have increased my appreciation for group decision-making.

The initiation of this innovation did make a difference to many children. After nine years of implementation the school has progressed to another level of awareness and currently has initiated another national reading model. Without the background of several staff members and the experience they gained through the initiation process, this new project would have never

surfaced. We were successful not only at increasing academic achievement and improvement, but at enlightening a group of teachers to the possibilities of school change through collaboration and participatory leadership. Their school culture has changed, thus permitting them to go forward with a sense of accomplishment in any future project.

I encourage the teachers at the school to keep their desire and openness to new thoughts and ideas. The experience of the past strengthens any undertaking in the future. The contentment of the status-quo will never prevent you from realizing your potential as educators and constantly exploring the unknown for answers.

In closing, I want to express my feelings of elation and inspiration at having an educational experience as rewarding as this has been. I really think that it is rare to be involved in a program that was a grass roots movement and its implementation lasted for so many years. The proficiencies I have acquired have improved my people skills and broadened my problem solving capabilities. I look forward to beginning other projects in my new assignment and pray for the best.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS

Appendix A

Interview Questions for Participants

Title I Teacher

(personal interview)

1. Why did the staff initiate this new reading program?
2. What part did you play in the planning and initiation?
3. Was this innovation needed and if so why or why not?
4. Did your teaching assignment or responsibility change and what happened?

Grade One Teacher

(personal interview)

1. What reason do you recall prompted this innovation?
2. What groups or individuals usually dealt with changes or problems and how did they react?
3. Why was your grade targeted for the pilot year in initiation?
4. What were your personal feelings about the new reading approach?
5. Why did your school choose this time to initiate a new program?
6. Did the innovation change your teaching methods or classroom approaches?

7. Who were, in your estimate, the key actors of the initiation?

Support Teacher

(personal interview)

1. What role did you play as support staff in the initiation of the innovation?
2. Did your teaching assignment or responsibilities change after initiation?
3. How did the new reading program affect your students?
4. Were there differences of opinions or similarities?
5. Why did you choose reading?

Grade Two Teacher

(personal interview)

1. Who were the major players in this change?
2. How did your attitude change during the planning and initiation?
3. Were there other changes that could have contributed to the new innovation?
4. Why did the school need a new reading approach?
5. Who took the responsibility for success or failure?
6. Were there varied opinions during the planning stages?
7. What benefits did you realize for students?
8. What factors influenced the faculty to begin a project like this?

Kindergarten Teachers

(focus group interview)

1. What opinions did your grade level have about the innovation?
2. Since you were not directly involved, what benefits did you have?
3. Who favored the initiation and why?
4. Why start a new reading approach in the first place?

Principal's Confidant

(personal interview)

1. What do you remember about this school when it first initiated the new reading program?
2. Why do you think the school began a new approach in reading?
3. Were there elements concerning the school that warranted a change?

Parent Group

(focus group interview)

1. As parents, what did you think about the school beginning a new reading program?
2. What were your children doing at that time and how did the program affect them?
3. What role did you play during the initiation?

4. What were your general reactions to the new program?

School Board Minutes/School Agendas/Newspaper Articles

(written interview)

1. What mention did the faculty make concerning the new reading program?

2. What was the public's reaction to the new innovation?

3. Did the board embrace the project in any way?

4. What role did the community or any external group have upon the program?

Assistant Superintendent

(personal interview)

1. What do you remember about this school's decision to initiate a new reading program?

2. How did you influence this decision?

3. Were there other issues like money or staff additions involved?

4. What reaction did you have personally about the program?

VITA

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II. Educational Background

Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies	1996	Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
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B.S.	1978	Averett College

III. Professional Educational Experiences

1997- Present	Principal, Clearview Elementary School, Martinsville City School System
1988-1997	Principal, Patrick Henry Elementary School Martinsville City School System

1985-1988	Assistant Principal, Albert Harris Elementary School, Martinsville City School System
1981-1985	Third Grade Teacher, Clearview Elementary School, Martinsville City School System
1978-1981	Third Grade Teacher, Druid Hills Elementary School, Martinsville City School System